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ABSTRACT

A study examined the ways in which members of low-income Southern African-American families deal with writing in their everyday lives. Three families headed by single parents participated in the study. The researcher resided with each family for 2 months, following the adults to their workplaces, sharing chores and leisure activities, and accompanying the children to school. She took field notes, conducted interviews, and collected writing samples. Results indicated that all of the writing done by the adults was either to aid memory (shopping lists, telephone numbers) or as requirements for business endeavors (contracts, invoices, receipts). Results implied that little writing was done due to: (1) the fact that free time was spent escaping stress; (2) negative attitudes about writing; and (3) the lack of satisfaction that they received from writing. The adults preferred oral communication to transfer information and family folklore. Results also indicated that the children never expressed negative attitudes about writing and often made time to write, squeezing it in between playing outdoors and watching television. In addition, they derived great satisfaction from writing, giving gifts of their writing to express love or appreciation. Results suggest that teachers can encourage writing (especially for African-American students) by asking their students to write their family histories, and by providing time for class discussion of things that they have learned outside of school. In addition, parents need to know that they can help children develop their skills by holding frequent family discussions. (Seventeen references are attached.) (PRA)

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LESSONS FROM THE WORKPLACE: WRITING AND ORAL COMMUNICATION IN THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

a paper presented at the 1991
Conference on College Composition and Communication
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LESSONS FROM THE WORKPLACE:
WRITING & ORAL COMMUNICATION IN THREE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES

Before I report to you on my research, I think it important to strongly point out the dangers of using a small sample to form generalizations about large groups. My research sample involved only three African-American families in the South. The only value of this data is in reporting what was there. Whether, in fact, other families similar to the ones I will discuss this afternoon exist is a possibility but **not** a probability. I would urge you to view my data as an invitation to find out more about African-American families and how they use and view writing and oral communication. Only after there are many such studies will we be able to extrapolate.

My research was partly inspired by my concern about the startling school dropout rate. In my hometown, Atlanta, Georgia, there have been over 8,250 dropouts over the past three years. According to Billingsley (1987), the rate among African-American students in large cities is well over 50%. But why is this? How have we let this happen? My experience pointed to one problem, but I could express it no better than John Dewey did in 1899. He wrote:

> From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of school in any complete and free way; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. (p. 40)

Almost seventy years later, James Moffett (1968) provided another perspective of virtually the same phenomenon. He wrote:

> A child is not an empty vessel when he enters school; he comes replete with a set of abstractions about the world and himself, some of which he may have acquired from others but some of which he generated himself from his own experience. (p.24)

Many of us are still ignoring the experience-filled youngsters who face us in class each day, especially if they are low-income, minority students. Indeed, I have heard many teachers remark: "These

children don't use their thinking skills." However, a close look at the children's neighborhood lives would prove that statement far from the truth. These youngsters know who to defy and who to obey; they know when a person is sad, happy, angry, on drugs --all conclusions they are able to draw by using the skills of implication. But because they are unsuccessful when we ask them to use these skills in the classroom without relating them to something they have done all their lives, some teachers say that they don't know how to think and reject them as learning disabled, dyslexic, special education candidates or worse. Consequently, they are served healthy diets of "ditto sheets" and evaluated by easy-to-check multiple guess tests. Soon, because these students begin to see no relationship between filling in the blanks or coloring in the little circles and their lives outside of school, they drop out or, worse, "tune out" so no learning takes place.

Clearly, we have to begin to discover what fills the vessels of these students and help them to develop so that they are able to use what they learn in school to help them have better lives. It was a perplexing problem, one that I answered as best I could in my own classroom but thought about less and less. The problem began to plague me again in 1970 when I began teaching writing in a developmental studies department at a New York college. All of the professors in the department worked diligently to help students achieve the skills they needed, but sadly some of our students could not measure up and were dropped from the college and the program. Many of them returned later and were successful, but I was concerned about the ones who did not. They were all African-American or Hispanic, and, for many of them, a higher education would prevent the monotony of dead-end jobs or, worse, no jobs at all. If, I reasoned, these students were entering college without adequate skills, what about those who would never attend college at all? Did we not owe them some tools for success?

Solutions to this problem were far from simple, but Lightfoot (1981) offered a route to finding solutions. She submitted that it was time we realized that learning can be made more successful and meaningful if the school, the family and the community share the responsibility and accountability for

educating students. I realized that, in many middle-class neighborhoods, this partnership is already in place. However, in most cases, these three agencies - the school, the family, and the community - have not worked together in low-income areas. One reason for this is the paucity of information about the everyday lives of African-Americans and other groups that make up a large number of low-income people. Consequently, many teachers and administrators may not be fully aware of the personal experiences of students and adults in the school community and, therefore, cannot incorporate these experiences into their educational planning. It is obvious that this situation can no longer continue, for, according to Robinson (1987), by the year 2000, one in every three U.S. citizens will belong to a minority race. And, he reported, their children, who will attend public schools, will be poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse and have more handicaps.

We cannot begin to answer the needs of the students who will face us in tomorrow's classrooms, I reasoned, unless we begin to collect some useable data. Therefore, the goal of my research was to study low-income African-Americans by focusing on the family. My aim was to discover how family members deal with writing in their everyday lives. Of course, the ability to write is not the only skill a person needs for successful functioning in life; reading and math are also important. However, I often saw African-American students from low-income families reading and using math, but I seldom saw them writing. I reasoned that if I discovered when they did write and exactly what they wrote, I could suggest some ways to augment writing programs in ways that would encourage African-Americans to use writing in beneficial ways.

My research took place in Dalver City, a Southern town with a population of 646,412 which sits along the Mississippi River. (In order to protect the identity of the families participating in my study, I have changed the names of the people and the town in which they lived). The families who participated in my study either lived or worked in an area of Dalver City called Sutterston. Sutterston, once a rural area near the Mississippi River called Sutter's Bluff, is an important area of Dalver City. By the early

1900's, Sutterston, which was once a landing post for slaves, was 97% African-American, the largest Black city in the state. Today, Sutterston has economically mixed inhabitants. For example, Sutterston inhabitants range from welfare recipients and common laborers to top managers and professors. Even so, poor, uneducated people far outnumber the more affluent educated. In fact, in 1974 (the latest statistics available), the Bureau of the Census reported that 93.9% of the Sutterston residents did not have a high school diploma.

Apparently, Sutterston's educational system has made very little headway in keeping young people in school. For the academic year 1988-89, the Dalver City Board of Education reported that the dropout rate in Sutterston was 282. or 19% of its 1,571 students. Of these 282 dropouts, 250, or 89%, dropped out of Sutterson's four high schools.

All of the families who participated in my study were single parent families. I chose single parent families because they represent a large proportion of African-American families in the United States, 44.9% according to the 1982 U.S. Census Bureau. In fact, an article in a recent issue of Essence magazine reported that, by the year 2000, 75% of African-American families will be headed by single parents. Even though the three families in my study were different in many ways, there were similarities in them. The members of all three families were born and raised in the South; senior members in each of the families were the great, great grandchildren of slaves; at some point in their lives, all the family members had lived on farms; and, all of the adult family members held blue-collar jobs.

Family I numbered seven, a 28-year-old mother who had dropped out of school when she became pregnant at age 15, and six children, five girls and one boy. The family, whose income was provided by welfare, lived in a group of two-story tenement buildings in Sutterston. All of the children, except the two youngest, a set of twins, attended school. The two oldest attended a middle school a block from their home. The two middle children, whose school was about fifteen miles away, were picked up by a bus each morning.

Family II, an extended family, consisted of seven members. The mother, a 62-year-old widow and her two sons, aged 45, and 25 who lived with her in Sutterston, a daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons, who lived in an area about five miles away. The mother lived in a small house which she was buying and worked at the university in Sutterston as a domestic. Her job entailed dusting, mopping, cleaning the lavatories and keeping them well supplied. Her youngest son also worked at the University. His job entailed the maintenance of the University's cooling system. Her oldest son, owned a small boutique at one of the shopping malls in Dalver City.

Family III was also an extended family. The mother, who worked as a paraprofessional at the same school in Sutterston attended by the two oldest girls in Family I, was a 35-year old divorcee. Although she was buying her own home, she and her daughter spent long periods of time at her parents' house. Three of her relatives, a brother, a sister and a niece also live with her parents.

My aim for this study was to focus on the question: What and why do people write? In order to do this, I resided with each of the three families for two months. During these months I became a member of the family, following the adults to their workplaces, sharing in their chores and leisure activities and accompanying the children to school. I took field notes on family members' writing habits, interviewed them and collected writing samples.

Why did the people involved in this study write? The answer was different for the adults than it was for the children. Many of the adults said that they could not write or they hated to write. Consequently, all of the writing done by the adults was either to aid memory (shopping lists, telephone numbers, workshop notes) or as requirements for business endeavors (contracts, invoices, receipts). It is my belief that the amount of writing produced by the adults in this study was closely related to several factors.

One of these factors is the amount of time people have to devote to the task. For the adults in this study, extra time that some people might spend writing was instead spent attempting to escape from

stress. Faced with stress, people usually seek relief by engaging in some soothing activity during their free hours which allows them to escape in some way for a period of time. Most of the adults in this study found some physical way of escaping.

(Here, in the interest of time, I will discuss only one example of each factor). In Family I, stress was related to instability in the home which was the result of inadequate living conditions and the frustration the mother felt trying to provide adequate needs for a large number of children when she, herself, lacked the skills of full literacy (she had only completed the 9th grade and was only functionally literate). When the entire family was at home (after school, holidays, and on weekends), she physically escaped. On some days, she left the apartment to visit a neighbor as soon as her two oldest children got home, leaving the oldest girl, to cook dinner and take charge of the other children. These afternoons and evenings were punctuated by the mother's sudden visits. She often marched through the front door and out the back giving orders as she walked. "Straighten up this mess: or "get in there and wash them dishes" or "cut that TV down, it's too loud," she would chant as she walked. Except for these periodic tirades, she usually did not return until all but the two oldest children had had their baths and were in bed.

On weekends and school holidays, she escaped by remaining in her bedroom with the door closed until early afternoon. Sometimes, after knocking on her door and receiving no answer, the children would find that she had left the house through the back door.

However, even when people are faced with high degrees of stress, they find time to perform tasks enjoyable to them. This brings us to the second factor which determined the amount of writing the adults in this study did - their attitudes about writing. There were many negative attitudes about writing but this one by the mother of Family II is exemplary. She told me:

> I don't write. That's one thing I hate to do. I hate to write a letter. I'll call first before I write a letter. I don't like sitting. Sitting down to write a letter when you can call on the phone is silly to me. I can express myself better in talking than writing. I have no other kind of writing to do besides signing a note or something for my daughter. If I want to talk to Karen teacher, I always call and tell them I need a conference and just call me at home. I don't keep a log. And no, I don't write no poems.

Although stress and attitudes about writing were reasons for the limited amount of writing produced by the adults in this study, they are all secondary to the third factor - the lack of satisfaction adults received from writing. A member of Family III explained it this way.

> I have to do a little writing for my business. You know, bills and bids and like that, but mostly I do not write because I ain't sure if the other person will understand what I'm trying to say. Part is spelling, but mostly I can't "touch" people. When you talk to people you can "touch" them.

Mina Shaughnessy (1977) described this as a phenomenon that effects many would be writers. She wrote:

> The listener...can query or quiz or withhold his nods until he has received the "goods" he requires from the speaker. Nothing like this open bargaining can go on in the writing situation, where the writer cannot keep an eye on his reader nor depend upon anything except words on a page to get him his due of attention. (p. 12)

The children in this study were quite different from the adults when it came to writing. None of them ever expressed negative attitudes although the boy in Family I had to be prodded to complete two of his writing events. The children also often made time to write, sometimes squeezing it between playing outdoors and watching television. They had a need to write things other than their school assignments. One of the girls in Family I, for example, composed a contract which she felt would earn money for her and her siblings as rewards for good grades. She also composed a promissory note which she gave to me when she borrowed some money; Another wrote a "lo-o-ng story" and a note of appreciation for me which read: "Miss Connie, you was great." The children in all three families also gave gifts of their writing - poems, stories, captioned drawings - to family members for birthdays, special holidays or just to express their love. They seemed to get great satisfaction out of writing.

As it often happens when participant observation is employed in research, other themes emerge. In this case, it was oral communication. The adult participants in this study preferred to converse rather than to write. But what did they talk about? Most importantly, could these topics be transmitted through

writing and produce the same pleasure it did through conversation? The data revealed that during speech events the participants in this study exchanged general information, community information, news about family affairs, family history and their knowledge about African-American history and culture.

The one thing that all of the families in this study shared was the importance of family. One manifestation of this was family reunions, a long-standing custom among Southern African-Americans. All three of the families had reunions yearly. While these reunions are one of the important conduits for transmitting information, more frequent transmissions take place around the dinner table.

I witnessed many such transmissions in Family III which shared their rich history during many evening hours. During these times, for example, younger family members heard about the first movie their elders had seen. The grandfather explained:

> A man came to town and put up a big tent. He hanged this white sheet on a clothes line and showed us the movie. It was one a them silent movies, Hop-Along Cassidy, starring Tom Mix. The fare was five cents.

The grandfather also told about clothes that were popular in those days.

> I had this suit. Zoot suit, they called it. Had real wide legs and skinny ankles. The ankles so tight, you had to grease your feet to get 'em on. Then I had this long gold chain hanging from the vest pocket clean to my knees. Man, you couldn't tell me I weren't sharp!

Another interesting story was about African-Americans in the early 1800's called "Free Jacks." They were called that, the grandfather reported, because they were freed from slavery during the Andrew Jackson era (a friend visiting Family III that night, said that the "son" syllable of Jackson got "burnt off"). Because Free Jacks were light-skinned, they could go anywhere without being detected. Therefore, they were sent as spies by African-American activists to attend white people's meetings and report what they had heard.

As I listened evening after evening, I remembered the information-filled conversations my own family shared. During these conversations, I had learned about family history, African-American history and culture, as well as the failures and accomplishments of friends and acquaintances. The telling and

retelling of these family incidents and philosophies were ways of instilling in my sisters and I the rewards and disappointments of struggle. Most of all, it was a way of building courage in order to survive and achieve. These conversations were important to my growth and self esteem. I recalled that many of these conversations took place around the dinner table. As Gates (1988) wrote:

> It is amazing how much black people, in ritual settings such as barbershops and pool halls, street corners, family reunions and the dinner table talk about family history. Why do they do this? I think they do it to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next. They do it to preserve the traditions of the race....These are **our** [original emphasis] texts to be delighted in, enjoyed, contemplated, explicated, and willed through repetition to our daughters and to our sons. (p. xi)

As we have said, the ritual settings which involve the largest number of our sons and daughters are reunions and the dinner table. Unfortunately, reunions usually happen only on special occasions--weddings, funerals, graduation, holiday gatherings, etc.--and these events are often far apart, sometimes as much as a year. Consequently, the transmission of family folklore, African-American history and values is left to informal gatherings in the nuclear family. But this transmission seems to be happening less and less. Of the three families, Family III was the only one which met and engaged in discussions often. These discussions always took place in conjunction with meals. Family II had fewer meals together, but they did have monthly meetings to plan their family reunions. Family I never ate together and sat down to converse only on three occasions during my residency with them.

This phenomenon, however, is not peculiar to African-Americans. According to Raiford (1987), American families in general have moved toward increased individualization. That is, fewer and fewer family members do things together. More and more, each member eats meals alone, has his/her own agenda, and own set of friends. Whether this increased individualization is caused by the need to escape from the stress of raising a large family on very limited resources, as was the case in Family I, or the irregular and varied work schedules exemplified in Families II and

III, it has caused many gaps in the transmission of rich family history, culture and values. However, if we can encourage people to record this information in writing, it can be successfully passed on to young

people. This opens a door for the teaching of writing.

Students can become researchers as they learn to write. They can interview their parents, grandparents and other elders and write their family histories. These can become desk-top publications, form libraries for the students and their families and promote literacy events during which the documents can be read, discussed and periodically updated. Through these exercises, students can learn the skills of research, interviewing, note-taking, organization, and editing. Further, students can be stimulated to read in the fields of history and social studies in order to understand the eras of their grandparents and great grandparents. Eventually, they will have written pages and pages.

But how can we stimulate students to continue to write, even about their family histories? One way is to employ the situations which already exist. For example, the children in Family I spent many hours per day in front of the television set. This pattern appears to be true in many homes. In fact, a recent study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (1988) revealed that eighth graders spend an average of 21.7 hours per week watching television. This average soared to 27.6 hours per week for African-American students, almost as many hours as they spend in school. Certainly it seems that television would be an excellent way of encouraging writing. However, a special educational program would probably be ineffective since, like those inFamily I, many children prefer to watch other things. An interesting phenomenon was that all of the children in this study paid rapt attention to commercials. They often stopped what they were doing to sing or dance along with the ones they had memorized. This offers a way to encourage writing. Catchy commercials could be aired to remind children about the joys of writing. They could even stimulate adults to try writing.

Probably the most poignant lesson we can learn from this research is that, although students do not come to school as empty vessels, they are not always filled with the treasures we expect. Like the children in Family I, many of these students have few books or reading experiences, no current magazines, no rich oral environments, no quiet corners to study. Consequently, the vessels of children from some

low-income families appear to be empty, but this is far from the truth. If we remove our middle-class notions we can see this. For example, a close look will reveal that one of the things that filled the Family I children's vessels were unanswered questions. "What is the Holy Ghost? If you drop a bullet, will it explode?" they asked me one day. Since their mother's only oral exchanges with them were demands, commands and reprimands, they were awed by my patient answers, and one of the children remarked, "Miss Connie knows everything!" All children's vessels contain numerous questions. Learning the answers to them can help them begin to think critically, solve problems and find the answers to subsequent questions on their own. The problem is that the low-income families we examined in this study had to deal with so many stressful situations that they seldom had the time to deal with their children's questions. Consequently, teachers must provide a forum for this exploration by providing discussion time when students are encouraged to talk about things they have learned or heard in their homes, in their neighborhoods, things they do not understand, things that puzzle them, make them happy, sad or frightened.

Along with their questions, the children's vessels are filled with special interests. We need to use these special interests to motivate them. For example, one of the children in this study loved to create mechanical things. Another found it necessary to compose specialized writing. These interests could have been used to provide them with reading material and things they could write about, something we know from previous research. Among others, Goswami (1984) and Atwell (1987) suggested that teachers become researchers in order to discover students' interests and needs and then build on them in the classroom. Regarding a student in her class, Atwell reported: "Just as soon as I knew his interests, I started feeding Tom books about the natural world" (p. 255). Soon Tom found books about his favorite subject on his own. Eventually he wrote a letter to the author of a book he particularly enjoyed. Interesting is that Tom's mother had reported that he disliked both reading and writing and probably would refuse to exert any effort in these subjects.

In other words, what children bring to school in their vessels is often, as a seed, far below the surface, waiting to be nurtured. Walter, Daniell, and Trachsel (1987) put it this way:

> Teaching literacy entails far more than imposing a set of linguistic structures, patterns, or form; it means helping students integrate reading and writing and ways of using reading and writing using the communicative strategies they already have so that they can function successfully--as themselves--in a variety of social contexts. (p. 865)

Among adults in this study, feelings about writing ranged from indifference to substitution. Freeman, Samuelson, and Sanders (1987) suggested that indifference occurs because little attention is paid to the functions of writing outside of the classroom, and therefore assignments are separated from real writing. Goodlad (1984) agrees. He says that teachers have their own agendas and they seldom coincide with students' daily lives, needs and concerns.

You might wonder, then whether I am saying that we should not teach essay and creative writing. On the contrary, meeting people's needs does not mean making a foolish decision similar to the one made by the builders of the luxury line Titanic who reasoned that, because the ship was unsinkable, it only needed to carry a few lifeboats. The solution is to **add** to rather than subtract from the writing curriculum. What then, can we add which can be more meaningful to students and stimulate continuous writing events beyond the classroom?

One thing we can do is to work more closely with parents to foster partnerships, as suggested by Lightfoot (1981). This means helping parents to develop their own writing skills and encouraging them to have frequent writing time in the home. Parents need to know that children write for specific purposes. In this study, for example, the children usually gave their work to family members, implying the importance of preserving children's work in some way in order to encourage more writing. Parents also need to know that they can help children develop their skills by holding frequent family discussions.

We know from experience, however, that merely stating this information to parents at a meeting or in a letter will not be effective. Instead, we must use another strategy. An excellent one seems to be Holland's (1987) notion of active teachers, that is, teachers who ask for parents' help, threat parents as

colleagues in their children's education and give parents specific invitations to interact in classroom activities. One way to accomplish this school-wide is by replacing parent-teacher conferences with hands-on workshops. During these workshops, parents could be engaged in the same type of writing activities their children are asked to do. Parents and teacher would not only engage in writing activities during the workshops, but they would learn from each other, share each others concerns, fears, problems, achievements, goals, and the insights which would help both groups to improve their own and the students' writing skills.

The frightening thing is that if we do not act quickly, we will lose the battle. The truth of this is clear when we examine the facts. Most of the children in my study showed an interest in writing and some wrote often. However, a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report revealed startling findings.

> Students seem to lose interest in writing as they get older. Fifty-five percent of fourth graders said they like to write, compared to 42 percent of eight-graders and 37 percent of 11th graders. (Conciatore, 1990, p. 4)

This implies that, by the time the children who participated in my study reach the 11th grade, they probably will have lost their enthusiasm for writing, a sad thing to have happen.

Writing is a powerful tool, perhaps the most powerful skill taught in school because, unlike other disciplines--reading, math and science, for examples--it allows students to deal with their own thoughts rather than those of others. We must lead a campaign to encourage African-American students especially, to write about their ideas, needs, fears, desires, family histories, culture and heritage. Their work can provide us with data, data which might explain why some students become disenchanted with school and drop out. These data can also be used to spark the formation of partnerships among schools, parents and communities. Certainly such campaigns are not the only answers, but they will be giant steps towards solving the problem of dropouts and tuneouts.

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